

Message

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urgent

EPA: East Chicago lead cleanup to resume this spring

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EAST CHICAGO — A panel of Environmental Protection Agency officials told residents on Saturday that soil excavation in the city's East Calumet and Calumet sections will start up again in the spring — even in the wake of media reports of a temporary freeze on work assignments and potentially significant staff and budget cuts under Donald Trump's new administration.

Doug Ballotti, EPA Region 5's acting director, said he doesn't "foresee a limitation in funding" within the agency's Superfund program or a slowdown at the lead- and arsenic-polluted USS Lead Superfund site.

The Trump administration's review of grants is complete and a review of contracts is expected to be completed soon, he added.

His comments came Saturday during a multiagency open house at the old Carrie Gosch Elementary School. About 100 people, mostly residents, attended.

Officials on Saturday said they remain in negotiations with Atlantic Richfield and DuPont — the successors to companies responsible for the pollution — for a cleanup in zone 2 of the Superfund site and are awaiting approval from federal headquarters for indoor dust cleanup in zone 3 homes.

While EPA reached a \$26 million settlement in 2014 with companies for a cleanup in zones 1 and 3 of the Superfund site, zone 2 — the middle part of the neighborhood — was left out of the consent decree.

Questions about the city's water quality dominated much of the discussion in light of recent EPA testing in a batch of homes showing elevated lead levels, though several people peppered EPA officials with questions on the soil excavation process and the potential for re-contamination years down the road.

The agency has identified an additional 71 “high priority” properties targeted for cleanup in the spring in zone 2 — the middle part of the neighborhood — and 33 in zone 3 — the eastern section, officials said. The homes were selected based on two factors: Whether a pregnant woman or children younger than age 7 resided at the property or if contamination levels found are above the EPA’s emergency cleanup standards of 1,200 ppm for lead and 68 ppm for arsenic.

Timothy Drexler, one of the agency's remedial project managers, said it will take “a couple of years” to address all 600 properties in zones 2 and 3 targeted for cleanup, he said. Cleanup in zone 1 — the West Calumet public housing complex and the old Carrie Gosch school — is on hold pending further discussion about the city's plans for the property.

Asked by residents about the potential for re-contamination years later, Drexler said “we never leave a site.” EPA will routinely monitor conditions and conduct formal reviews every five years, he said.

At least two homeowners were, at times, visibly frustrated and questioned the logic in spending \$50,000 on cleanup per property — an estimate officials provided Saturday — when the average home value in the Calumet area is below or equal to that. Drexler said it's extremely rare for the EPA to evacuate Superfund sites, noting the agency during excavation puts several protective measures in place to monitor and prevent the spread of airborne toxins.

At times, some residents questioned the decades long response time from local, state and federal agencies despite knowledge as far back as the mid 1980s that the West Calumet Housing Complex was built on the footprint of a former lead smelter. The neighborhood and the former USS Lead facility were first proposed for the EPA’s Superfund list in 1992, but were not added until April 2009. Residents didn’t learn of the severity of the lead and arsenic contamination in the soil until last summer.

Drexler said the EPA, which frequently evaluates response times across the U.S., aims to communicate more quickly with residents moving forward.

'Lead lines are lead lines'

Audience members repeatedly asked the EPA about its recent drinking water test results. EPA's sequential testing — a more rigorous form of sampling than required by federal regulation — showed 18 homes in the Superfund site also had elevated lead levels in the water.

The city has said it is in full compliance with the federal Lead and Copper Rule, which limits the amount of lead and copper allowed in drinking water, but the message from EPA water expert Del Toral was clear: Buy a water filter and take the necessary precautions.

Officials urged residents to avoid cooking with unfiltered water and running hot water through the filter. They also suggested running unfiltered cold water for at least five minutes to flush the pipes every morning.

“Lead lines are lead lines, no matter if you’re in this neighborhood or that neighborhood, this city or that city. They behave the same,” Del Toral said. “If we did the same testing elsewhere, we would find the same thing.”

Later, Del Toral told a small group at the open house to “assume you have lead pipes.”

“That’s the only way you can protect your family,” he said.

About a dozen various regional, state and federal groups were on hand Saturday in the school's cafeteria to speak with residents. Two booths reserved for the city and its health department were empty, though the postcard sent by EPA to residents advertised that the city would have information on hand on its water valve program.

City attorney Carla Morgan could not be reached for comment Saturday.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/post-tribune/news/ct-ptb-east-chicago-epa-forum-st-0129-20170128-story.html>

Presidential transition will not affect East Chicago cleanup, EPA official says

EPA officials Saturday updated East Chicago residents on the remediation work at the USS Lead Superfund site.

Craig LyonsPost-Tribune

The ongoing presidential transition should not impede clean-up efforts at the U.S.S. Lead Superfund site in East Chicago, an Environmental Protection Agency official said Saturday.

Doug Ballotti, acting division director the Superfund division for EPA Region 5, said he does not anticipate any changes in the Superfund program and that money for the Calumet neighborhood cleanup should remain stable.

ADVERTISING

"We don't foresee a limitation in our funding at this stage," said Ballotti, who spoke with East Chicago residents at an EPA forum.

His comments come in the wake of President Donald Trump's order that EPA employees temporarily suspend new business activities, according to The Associated Press, and the institution of a media blackout, barring EPA press releases, blog posts and social media posts. Trump also instituted a federal hiring freeze.

Tim Drexler

Tim Drexler, an EPA remedial project manager, explains the progress being made to clean up zones 2 and 3 of the U.S.S. Lead Superfund site in East Chicago and what still needs to be done. Drexler spoke at a public forum held for residents Saturday. (Jim Karczewski / Post-Tribune)

Ballotti said the review of the agency's grant program is complete and the one looking at its contracts is nearly complete.

"That pause did not impact the Superfund program," Ballotti said.

The EPA will continue to provide information to the public, according to Ballotti. "We're still pretty much operating the way we've always operated," he said.

The agency held a multiagency open house Saturday — the first the EPA has had since September — for residents to hear updates on the U.S.S. Lead Superfund site. Residents continued to push EPA officials for information on the cleanup and the testing that found elevated levels of lead in the drinking water.

Maritza Lopez said residents are concerned the EPA is not doing enough to keep them informed about the work that's been done at their properties and where they now stand. She said many residents didn't even get postcards telling them about the forum Saturday.

Tim Drexler, an EPA remedial project manager, apologized that some residents might not have received their sampling results from the agency, assuring them they'd be available at the next open house.

"We certainly recognize your sentiment," Drexler said.

Jesse Avita

Zone 3 resident Jesse Avita asks a question during a forum Saturday at which U.S. EPA officials updated people on the status of the U.S.S. Lead Superfund cleanup work. (Jim Karczewski / Post-Tribune)

Residents also wanted to know why EPA officials don't attend the weekly meetings of their community advisory group. Thomas Frank said he wanted to make sure the EPA knew there was an active resident organization in East Chicago.

Several times, audience members raised questions as to why the EPA is not providing them with water filters after tests found elevated lead levels in the drinking water. The EPA is telling people to install water filters in their homes but many can't afford them, resident Lendell Smith said.

Miguel Del Toral, of the EPA's water branch, said the agency is not providing filters. The sampling work done with drinking water sought to assess the impact that construction had on the lead water infrastructure and if the contamination from those pipes made it to residents' taps, Del Toral said.

As the EPA halted remediation efforts throughout the Superfund site in December, the agency found that 18 of the 43 homes where the water was tested exceeded 15 parts per billion of lead, the EPA's threshold for water safety.

Maritza Lopez

Maritza Lopez, a resident of Zone 3 in the U.S.S. Lead Superfund site, asks a question during a public forum with EPA officials held Saturday. (Jim Karczewski / Post-Tribune)

The EPA tested the water during remediation work to see if the excavation had any effect on the lead service lines throughout the neighborhood, according to court documents. During excavation, the EPA gave residents bottled water, according to court documents, and gave water filters to residents who had work done at their properties.

Drexler said the agency could restart its excavation operations in April, weather permitting.

As the 2016 construction season wrapped up, EPA officials had remediated soil at 17 homes in Zone 2 of the site, which runs from McCook Avenue to East Huish Drive, and 38 in Zone 3, which runs from East Huish Drive to Parrish Avenue.

In Zone 2, the EPA sampled soil from 494 of 596 homes, according to the federal agency, and 419 of 480 homes in Zone 3.

EPA officials anticipated that at least 395 homes in Zone 2 and 212 in Zone 3 still need remediation, according to documents filed in federal court.

Indoor dust sampling was done at residences in Zones 2 and 3, according to the EPA. If levels of lead were above those considered safe, cleaning was offered to those residents. The EPA will continue to sample dust in homes when excavation restarts in the spring, officials said.

"We hope to do as many of the properties as we can each year," Drexler said.

At the West Calumet Housing Complex, EPA contractors cleaned 270 units.

Tom Alcamo, an EPA remedial project manager, said the EPA does not have plan to excavate soil from Zone 1, as those plans will change once the city demolishes the West Calumet Housing Complex.

"Right now, that cleanup is on hold," Alcamo said.

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<http://www.nwitimes.com/news/special-section/infant-mortality/east-chicago/>
Longform piece on children's mortality rates in the East Chicago area.